

Trump vs. the Deep State, by Patrick Lawrence - The Unz Review

Feb. 16th, 2025

 Send to Kindle

This is the first of two commentaries examining what the writer reads as President Trump's unfolding offensive against the institutions and agencies comprising the deep state — or, if you prefer, the administrative state or the permanent state or the invisible government. The second in this series will follow shortly.

Wow. In a series of rapid-fire developments last week, the new Trump regime has decisively joined the battle with the deep state on the national security side. This is big, or could be. Either Donald Trump will begin to exert political control over the invisible government or the invisible government will sink Donald Trump just as it did during his first term as president. Let us be attentive.

The attack on USAID, the telephone call with Vladimir Putin, the incipient alienation of the Kiev regime, new talk of talks with the

Islamic Republic, Tulsi Gabbard's confirmation as director of national intelligence: I don't know if these events and their timing reflect a concerted plan, back-of-an-envelope inspirations, or the president's thinking but not necessarily the thinking of those around him. Let us in any case consider these rat-a-tat developments as one if we are to understand what is fundamentally at issue.

And we must add another to the above list. On Feb. 13 Trump came out with his most explosive proposal to date — or one of them, given how quickly the explosions come these days. This was his statement, as recorded by C-SPAN Thursday, that he wants to convene with the presidents of Russia and China, “and I want to say, let's cut our military budget[s] in half.”

Now you know what I mean by “Wow.” Now you know what I mean when I suggest Trump is on course — purposefully, I would say, of his own volition — to confront the very apparatus that more or less destroyed his first term in office.

The term “deep state” is a literal translation of the Turkish *derin devlet*, the name given to an invisible network of army officers who exercised power independently of the government during the Cold War. In America's case, the deep state has been with us more or less since the Truman administration authorized its

bedrock institutions shortly after the 1945 victories — the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947, the National Security Agency five years later. It came to the surface — an underpowered phrase for the event, but let's leave it — on Nov. 22, 1963. In subsequent years, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan made clear in *Secrecy: The American Experience* (Yale, 1998), a “culture of secrecy” grew like kudzu in Washington. The late senator wrote of “the routinization of secrecy” and “concealment as a modus vivendi.” This was the fetid garden in which the deep state flourished.

Readers may recall that it was as Donald Trump rose in national politics during the 2016 political season that “the deep state” entered public discourse, so far as I know, for the first time. This was for good reason: It had come to the surface again. Trump's talk of a détente with Russia, an end to America's wars of adventure, and other supposedly crazy-weird-reckless-madman ideas alarmed the generals and spooks. The prospect of Trump defeating Hillary Clinton at the polls that November freaked out the liberal authoritarians. Common cause was made; mass media and the organs of justice and law enforcement played important supporting roles.

I don't recall just when the estimable Ray McGovern fashioned the term MICIMATT, his clever acronym designating the

military-industrial, congressional, intelligence, media, academic and think tank spheres, to describe the deep state's extensive presence, but whenever it was it was none too soon. The early deep state seems now like one of those boxy TV sets we associate with television's first years — clunky, primitive. Now the organism's tentacles reach into all the MICIMATT quadrants and, I imagine, probably beyond them. Is MICIMATT+ our term?

The deep state turned monstrously malignant during the Russiagate years and worsened yet further as it spread to America's most basic institutions, not least but not only the Justice Department, during Biden's calamitous term. It is now a stage 4 cancer, I would say. Of all the crises afflicting our enfeebled republic, the tumorous growth of the deep state must be ranked among the gravest.

Trump is obviously intent on attacking the deep state in most or all of its manifestations, and you can't blame him after the relentless sabotage of his first term in office. This is *prima facie* a worthy endeavor. I would like to think Trump's project is about more than mere revenge, because purpose, intent, will prove decisive to the success or failure of any effort to decommission, cripple, restrain, or dismantle an edifice so large.

Let me put it this way: In the case of Trump *vs.* the deep state, there is promise in the undertaking, but I have my doubts. He does not seem to me to have the gravitas, the depth of intelligence and all-around seriousness, to get this very necessary task done well and effectively. Engaging the deep state is not the same as sitting opposite a rival property developer at a mahogany table in Manhattan. Trump does not seem sufficiently equipped to wage war against operatives whose perverse savvy in the methods of subterfuge is well-tested and well-proven.

There are too many ways the intelligence agencies and the rest of the deep state's sprawling apparatus can do Trump in a second time, to put this point another way. Equally, he and his people will do themselves in if they do not go at the task within the bounds of the Constitution. And let us not be so foolish as to assume the Democrats will refrain from once again misusing government institutions, or that the generals and spooks will stand by quiescently, or that the punks reporting Trump in mainstream media will indulge in less lying, mis- and disinformation this time than they did the last. They are, indeed, already hard at it.

No, if all goes well we will witness chaos or something close to it these next four years, such is the resistance to Trump's program likely to prove. But at this point there is simply no ridding the

American polity of this malevolent force hiding within it without a mess of historical magnitude.

This voice within keeps whispering to me. Maybe it is my memories of times gone by, but I ask myself: Why Trump? Why isn't there someone with good politics and a sound analysis of the deep state as a national crisis to take up the task? Going way out on a limb, way out, even a re-educated liberal whose resolve points in the right direction would do.

But it is Trump. O.K., it was Trump's political rise that drew the deep state out of the bushes, after all. He certainly seems to be angry and determined enough to begin the work we must all acknowledge has to be done. And if he fails to get very far in bringing the beast under control, can't we count his failed try a good start? I do not think, I mean to say, the deep state's presence in America's political life will ever be off the table now that Trump has put its insidious presence on it. This is a good thing.



There is no unequivocal applause due for Elon Musk's *blitzkrieg* raid on the U.S. Agency for International Development earlier this month. The argument that his lightning attack is

unconstitutional seems to me specious, given that USAID's charter puts the agency under "the direct authority and policy guidance of the secretary of state." But the pack of twenty-somethings the crypto-fascistic Musk has deployed across Washington swept into USAID's building like some combination of China's Red Guards and the juvenile monsters who populate *Lord of the Flies*. Not a good start if bringing the deep state's various elements under democratic control is the project.

It remains the case that the agency's activities include aid that benefits a great many people in underdeveloped nations. But it is important to recognize the significant place of USAID in the deep state's extensive operations. As readers have reminded me since I published the above-linked piece, I was too generous in the emphasis I placed on USAID's humanitarian operations. "What I have seen most is elected leaders in the Global South rejoicing in its [USAID's] demise," one reader remarked in the comment thread at Consortium News. He then quotes from [a social media post by Nayib Bukele](#), El Salvador's leftist-turned-populist president for the past six years:

Most governments don't want USAID funds flowing into their countries because they understand where much of that money actually ends up. While marketed as support for development, democracy, and human

rights, the majority of these funds are funneled into opposition groups, NGOs with political agendas, and destabilizing movements.

At best, maybe 10 percent of the money reaches real projects that help people in need (there are such cases), but the rest is used to fuel dissent, finance protests, and undermine administrations that refuse to align with the globalist agenda. Cutting this so-called aid isn't just beneficial for the United States; it's also a big win for the rest of the world.

I cannot verify Bukele's statistic, but even if his percentage is off by a magnitude of three or four or five, you come to understand why Musk's purge at USAID has prompted few cries of desperation, if any, from the world's non-Western majority.

It remains a big, interesting question whether Trump and Musk, and for that matter Secretary of State Marco Rubio, will forego USAID's many illegal subversion operations — precisely those that merit an immediate end. It is pretty to think so, but let's not get carried away. It was Musk who declared years ago, when the United States had just forced Evo Morales from the presidency in Bolivia, "We can coup anybody we want." Doesn't Musk recall how that got done — by way of backing conservative-Catholic

reactionaries of Spanish extraction and the usual gaggle of USAID-funded “civil society” NGOs? Remember, Musk had his eye then on Bolivia’s vast deposits of lithium for the batteries of his cars. And there are a lot more Teslas on the road now than there were then.

Venezuela, Nicaragua, elsewhere in Central America: Latin America is thick with USAID projects of the kind Bukele denounced last week, and Rubio is nothing if not a coup-mongering interventionist with a particular interest in the region. Ongoing destabilization projects in the old Soviet republics and satellites, notably Georgia and Romania, where USAID has subterfuge operations under way as we speak: What about these? Levelling USAID and building a like agency from the ground up is what should be done. The Trump–Musk operation has struck an initial blow at a key deep state institution, but everything else remains to be seen.



We have to count Trump’s telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin the biggest news of last week. This is more, much more, than the bureaucratic warfare Musk seems set upon waging. It marks a major reversal for the deep state even if nothing at all

comes of it — and nothing at all, we had better bear in mind, is a possibility.

To give this turn the briefest context, it was after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, that the Richelieus running the Bush II administration declared that the United States can no longer speak to its adversaries: That would “lend them credibility.” Remarkably enough, this asinine reasoning has pretty much prevailed ever since. Joe Biden and his adjutants took this to a reckless extreme, with rare exceptions refusing contacts with Moscow even as they stoked tensions to the brink of another global conflict. But the Biden policy was merely the logical outcome of the nitwittery that dates back to the Bush–Cheney–Rumsfeld days.

Deep staters love the diplomacy of no diplomacy. They thrive on it. It amounts to a passive-aggressive confirmation of the American imperium’s exceptionalism. And to refuse contacts with enemies, or those the policy cliques have turned into enemies, creates just the environment necessary to maintain high levels of danger. Incessant peril, threats everywhere, if I am not stating the obvious, are good for the deep state’s business — notably but not only the bottomlessly corrupt business of the military-industrial complex. Cutting off all contacts with Moscow worked in this way. In my reckoning, Washington would

do the same with China except that the United States is so far into the Chinese economy that this is not a workable option.

There is much talk now of Trump and his people changing the world order. We must wait to see how true this turns out to be. But when Trump and Putin picked up their telephones last week, each hearing the voice of the other, the world as we have known it these past years took a turn for the better. This seems a certainty.

<https://www.unz.com/plawrence/trump-vs-the-deep-state/>